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Financial aid office announces three new efforts to streamline process

By automating winter clothing grants, increasing travel allowances and eliminating required reapplication for Questbridge match students, the office hopes to reduce barriers to receiving aid and devote more time to working directly with students.

MOLLY REINMANN | 1:52 AM, NOV 13, 2023

STAFF REPORTER

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In the three months since she assumed the role of director of undergraduate financial aid, Kari DiFonzo has already implemented numerous changes regarding grants for travel and winter clothing.

The Office of Undergraduate Financial Aid recently announced three changes to its policy, to be implemented for the 2024-2025 academic year. The first entails the automation of the winter clothing grant, a program that provides students with funds to purchase warm clothes for the winter months. Second, the office has approved a higher travel allowance amount for all students on financial aid. Lastly, Questbridge match students will no longer be required to reapply for financial aid after their first year. Overall, the financial aid office hopes these changes will alleviate some of the stress of applying for aid as well as free up staff resources to work directly with students.

“We are working with limited resources. We’re working with limited staffing,” DiFonzo told the News. “By automating and simplifying some of these processes, my hope is that it frees up some of the staff resources to do that work that we really need to be doing and working

directly with students. I'm really hopeful that these efforts will help us move the pendulum so that we've got some more time to have those interactions with students and families."

Until this year, students had to apply to receive these grants through Safety Net, a portal through which students can request funds to cover "unexpected financial hardships." Once receiving funds, students had to provide receipts back to Safety Net to prove that they spent the money appropriately, DiFonzo said.

In past years, the program has received some criticism, with students complaining of the long and difficult process to obtain a grant, as well as calling for higher and more regular grant amounts.

Last year, the maximum amount a student could receive for a winter clothing grant was \$300, but not every eligible student received this amount. Joanna Ruiz '25, for example, previously told the News that she received only \$275.

This year, students no longer need to apply in order to receive a grant, DiFonzo said. Instead, she explained, all first-year students with a zero parent share — defined as students whose parents earn less than \$75,000 annually — automatically received \$400 directly deposited into their bank accounts at the beginning of October.

The students are also no longer required to submit receipts to Safety Net, according to DiFonzo.

"Personally, I grew up in the South," DiFonzo said. "My idea of a winter coat when I came to Massachusetts was fleece. By mid-October, I was freezing, and I didn't have a warmer coat. So we really want to make sure that money was in the hands of our neediest students as early as we could get it to them so that they had an opportunity to get some warmer clothing before it got too cold outside."

According to DiFonzo, students who do not have a zero parent share do not qualify for the automatic grant, but they can still apply through Safety Net for funding.

According to data that Quinlan shared with the News, 389 auto-funded winter clothing grants of \$400 were distributed at the beginning of October. In total, these grants amount to \$155,600 dispersed by the financial aid office.

Additionally, according to Quinlan, the office has funded an additional 54 clothing grants — amounting to \$21,900 — in response to student requests.

In a message to the News, Maya Fonkeu '25, vice president of Yale College Council, wrote that the automation of the winter clothing grant does a “great job” of lowering financial barriers for low-income Yalies. However, she and the YCC hope to see the office work more toward these efforts in the future.

“The YCC has done extensive work in the past to provide funding for winter clothing and we hope that the financial aid office continues this momentum beyond just students with a \$0 parent share,” she told the News.

DiFonzo said that, in addition to alleviating students’ stress about having to apply for grants, this automation by CoreIntegrator also relieves some administrative burden. Instead of delegating time to review grant applications one by one, financial aid officers can devote this time to other things, like working directly with students and parents, DiFonzo said.

Both DiFonzo and Jeremiah Quinlan, dean of undergraduate admissions and financial aid, said they believed the automation of these funds is unique among peer institutions. Quinlan described the efforts as “above and beyond” the norm.

“I think, in the past, we felt like the process of asking and getting approval was taking too long and we weren’t being proactive enough,” Quinlan said. “With everything else that’s going on in a student’s semester, why make them ask? This is just a much more direct, proactive way to do it and to control the timing. And we definitely felt like it was better for both students and the administration.”

The second change in financial aid policy sees the increase in financial aid funding dedicated to covering students’ travel costs.

According to Quinlan, officers noted during their annual reviews that funds allocated to cover students’ travel costs were no longer reflecting the actual expenses of travel to and from New Haven. While travel allowances have always been designed to cover two round trips to Yale for domestic students, Quinlan said that research showed that the actual dollar amount dedicated to these allowances was lacking.

If the travel allowances distributed in a student’s cost of attendance did not cover the actual expenses of their trip, DiFonzo said that students in the past had to pay the difference out of pocket.

Starting in the next academic year, the financial aid office will allocate more funds explicitly toward covering students’ travel expenses, according to DiFonzo and Quinlan.

“This is going to add an additional hundreds of thousands of dollars to the financial aid budget,” Quinlan told the News. “Almost all Yale students are going to see an increase in financial aid because of this change in policy.”

According to Fonkeu, efforts to decrease transportation expenses have also been undertaken by the YCC. Last year, the YCC distributed free train tickets and travel vouchers to needy students.

The YCC senate also recently passed a pilot project to reimburse rideshare fees to and from non-emergent hospital visits, according to

Fonkeu.

The financial aid office has also changed the policy of travel aid for international students, bringing the policy in line with domestic student aid. Instead of receiving coverage for only one round trip to campus, international students will now receive financial aid for two trips to and from Yale, DiFonzo explained.

Finally, the financial aid office announced that, for the first time next academic year, Questbridge match students admitted to the class of 2028 will not have to reapply for financial aid after their first year. For returning Questbridge match students, they will not be required to reapply for financial aid starting for the 2024-2025 academic year.

While these students will still be required to complete the FAFSA form in order to qualify for and receive federal Pell Grants, they will not be asked to submit any other materials to Yale's financial aid office unless they so choose.

All Questbridge match scholars are guaranteed a zero parent share for all four years as an undergraduate, DiFonzo explained.

“The reason we’re minimizing the returning process for them is because if we’ve already promised them a zero, why are we requiring reapplication each year?” DiFonzo said. “A zero parent share is a zero parent share.”

While they will no longer be required to reapply for financial aid each year, Questbridge match students can choose to reapply if their circumstances change, according to DiFonzo.

Overall, DiFonzo and Quinlan said they are excited about the potential of these new initiatives to make financial aid simpler and more accessible.

“Questbridge students no longer having to reapply for financial aid after their first year is a great policy change,” Fonkeu wrote to the

News. “I hope to see the office extend that same policy or at least shorten the reapplication process for all students on financial aid especially since there was a lot of student frustration with the financial aid office this year.”

She pointed to the slow wait times for financial aid packages and poor communication as sources of this frustration. In the future, Fonkeu said the YCC plans to advocate for the elimination of late fees and aid application fees.

The Office of Undergraduate Financial Aid was created in 2017.

Correction, Nov. 14: A previous version of this article incorrectly reported the amount that Ruiz received.

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